

WILLIAM MAXWELL WOOD—THE FIRST SURGEON GENERAL, U. S. NAVY, AND THE FIFTH CHIEF OF THE BUREAU OF MEDICINE AND SURGERY

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BY AN act of Congress, March 3, 1871, it was provided that "the Chiefs of the Bureaus of Medicine and Surgery, Provisions and Clothing, Steam Engineering, and Construction and Repair, shall have the relative rank of commodore, while holding said position, and shall have respectively the title of surgeon general, paymaster general, engineer in chief, and chief constructor." The first to bear this new title of Surgeon General, though the fifth to hold office as Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, was William Maxwell Wood, of Maryland. He was born in Baltimore on May 27, 1809, and appointed as Assistant Surgeon in the Navy May 1, 1829. He was commissioned as Fleet Assistant Surgeon January 1,

1835, and Surgeon February 20, 1838.

His naval service was of an unusual and varied nature and included duty during the period connected with the suppression of piracy, the slave trade, the Seminole War, and the Mexican and Civil Wars. His first sea duty was in the West Indies at a period when our Navy was engaged in its successful attempt to destroy piracy there. Following this he was at sea on the Brazil station on a frigate employed in the less successful attempt to interrupt the slave trade.

In 1839 Dr. Wood went to the U.S.S. *Poinsett*, designated as the flagship of "The Expedition for the Suppression of Indian Hostilities on the Coast of Florida." This was during the trouble with the Seminole Indians. The

Poinsett was one of the first steam vessels in our Navy. She was a small paddle wheel steamer and burned wood. One of the main tasks of the crew was cutting and storing wood which was often too green to burn and the commanding officer in his letters is con-



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stantly referring to his difficulty with fuel. Once during a gale he made port after burning "the planks and all the spare articles on board, and also a barrel of tallow." While serving on the *Poinsett* in Florida which until 1819 had been a Spanish colony, Dr. Wood began the study of the Spanish language and later came to speak and read it fluently, an accomplishment which was to have an important bearing on his career.

After a period of shore duty at Baltimore he went to the Pacific Station going around Cape Horn and visiting

many of the Southern American countries, Honolulu, and Mexico. He was Fleet Surgeon of the Pacific Fleet at the outbreak of the Mexican war. He rendered a great service to his country by furnishing the earliest precise information to Commodore Sloat regarding the beginning of war. Dr. Wood had been ordered home on duty with the Pacific Squadron when he was crossing Mexico from San Diego to Vera Cruz, bearing important dispatches. Learning of the opening of hostilities he sent a message to Commodore Sloat at Mazatlan which enabled that officer to begin the operations which resulted in the acquisition of California. Dr. Wood's part in the acquisition of California was warmly acknowledged by Commodore Sloat, and the Chairman of the Senate Committee of the United States. In commenting on it, said, "Every intelligent mind must at once appreciate the importance of the service which you have rendered the country, at your personal hazard in traveling through the heart of the enemy's territory, communicating with your military superior, and furnishing him with the sole and otherwise unattainable information upon which he based the acquisition of California. The importance of this acquisition can best be estimated by asking ourselves, what would have been our national position in the Pacific and upon our Oregon frontier had Great Britain, instead of ourselves, acquired permanent possession of it? We have always contended that the acquisition constitutes one of the Nation's strongest claims upon the gratitude

the Nation, and this chapter in its history, furnished by your own service, strengthens this conviction."

The credit gained in the Mexican War perhaps assisted Dr. Wood in obtaining duty which he desired and enjoyed in his home town of Baltimore, Maryland. He was ordered as Medical Officer of the Naval Rendezvous there. During this tour of duty he published his first book, *Wandering Sketches* which gave an account of his travels in South America, Polynesia and California. When Dr. Wood delivered his dispatches from Commodore Sloat to the Secretary of the Navy, the latter complimented the Doctor on his courage and resource in crossing Mexico with these important papers. His intimate knowledge of Spanish had been of great assistance to him in doing this. The Secretary was no other than Mr. Bancroft, the historian, and he was struck by Dr. Wood's ability and also by certain views he expressed to improve the status of medical officers. Mr. Bancroft asked him to submit his recommendations in writing, which he did. He suggested the following:

Assistant Surgeon	}	to rank with that of Master Surgeon
Wounded Assistant Surgeon		
Surgeons (less than 10 years service) to rank with that of Lieutenant		
Surgeons (more than 10 years service) to rank with that of Commander		

The rank of Lieutenant Commander did not then exist. This proposal did not lead to any tangible results at the time but it is of great interest showing how the forward looking medical men of the Navy were endeavoring to im-

prove conditions in their Corps and thus attract the best type of physicians to the naval service. It was one of the first of many such attempts all of which contributed to bring about better conditions for the care of the sick and injured and the prevention of disease in the Navy.

Dr. Wood was one of the most able and persistent advocates of the improvement of conditions of the sailor. He was a vigorous opponent of harsh punishments such as flogging and long confinements both common in the old Navy and of the immoderate use of alcohol, another blot on "the good old days."

Following his duty in Baltimore, Dr. Wood was ordered to the U.S.S. *Michigan*, the only important armed vessel maintained by the government on the Great Lakes. Her home port was Erie, Pennsylvania and she spent much of the time there, making short cruises from time to time on the Lakes. In 1853 he went to shore duty at Sacketts Harbor, New York, where there was a small naval station. A letter addressed from there is quoted as showing not only Dr. Wood's request for duty but the old fashioned mode of conclusion, and the name of the Secretary of the Navy at the time.

Sacketts Harbor, March 10, 1855

Sir:

I hereby respectfully apply for the appointment of Fleet Surgeon to the Mediterranean Squadron to be fitted out.

My service heretofore has been in the West Indies and Gulf of Mexico, on the Coast of Brazil, and in the Pacific Ocean. I have never been in the Mediterranean and had the written promise of the late Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery that I would be detailed.

for that duty when the next Mediterranean Squadron was fitted out.

Very respectfully,
Yours, Obdt. Servt.
Wm. Maxwell Wood
Surgeon, U. S. Navy

To the
Hon. James C. Dobbins
Secretary of the Navy
Washington, D.C.

The place requested in the Mediterranean Squadron had already been filled but in September, 1855, Dr. Wood was ordered as Fleet Surgeon of the East India Squadron. The flagship was the *San Jacinto*. She was to visit Siam to arrange for commercial relations with that country, then to China and Japan to negotiate for trading ports. The voyage was made by way of the Cape of Good Hope and Indian Ocean visiting Ceylon, Malacca, Singapore, Hong Kong, Canton, Shanghai, and Shimode, Japan. One interesting place was Macao, the Portuguese port near Canton where Camoens, the great epic poet of Portugal, composed much of his immortal poem, "The Lusiad."

In November, 1856, a United States squadron consisting of the *San Jacinto*, the *Portsmouth* and the *Levant* were concentrated at Hong Kong to protect American interests in Canton jeopardized by strong anti-foreign feeling among the Cantonese. This resulted in an attack on the Barrier forts, as they were called, below Canton, their capture and destruction. After the engagement, Dr. Woods cared for the wounded at a hospital in an Italian mission in Hong Kong, surrounded by Chinese. A guard of marines was

landed to protect the wounded and their attendants. A curious incident was an attempt by a European owner of a bakery to poison the entire population of Hong Kong, from the government down, by placing arsenic in his bread. It resulted in the poisoning of thousands. Dr. Wood escaped as by chance he ate bread from another bakery. His patients all were attacked with arsenic poisoning except one man who had lockjaw and could not masticate! Fortunately, none of the hospital patients died.

The commander of the East India Squadron was James Armstrong, "Flag Officer, U. S. Navy Forces, East Indian and China Seas," as was his official title. His health was shattered and he obtained authority to return to the United States via Europe and to bring the Fleet Surgeon with him. On his return to the United States, Dr. Wood was again assigned to the U.S.S. *Malagan*. He returned in 1858 and again went to shore duty at Erie, Pennsylvania, which he made his home until 1862. During this period he published his second book describing his voyage to the Orient.

The years of the Civil War, from January 7, 1862, to March 7, 1864, were spent as Fleet Surgeon of one of the blockading squadrons. A similar report by him on conditions on the James River Flotilla is still in the files of the Navy Department and is of great interest. It states that the prevalent diseases are Diarrhea, Dysentery, Typhoid Fever and Scurvy. Dr. Wood recommended the use of distilled water to prevent the first two, and points out

but scurvy was also unnecessary as vegetables and other fresh provisions could be easily procured. Of malaria he says:

"Experience has shown that those malarious months which are most influential in the autumn are much diminished by the use of a hygienic tonic. I would therefore advise that until the appearance of frost, there be sent to the ship's companies every morning breakfast quinine in wine or whisky, under the apportionment and direction of the medical officer of each vessel. Every real purpose would be met by the quinine alone, but the wine would render it less objectionable to the women."

This recommendation was one commonly followed in both the Army and Navy during the Civil War and led to some of the most famous soldier stories about that war. One celebrated story states that quinine powder was added to all in the crew who felt a touch of malaria coming on and a "shot" of whisky given afterwards to remove the bitter taste of the quinine. Everyone felt a touch of "malaria." A day or two later after serving out the quinine one morning it was announced that the supply of whisky was exhausted.

Dr. Wood was detached as Fleet Surgeon March 7, 1864. Most of his time had been spent on the U.S.S. *Minnesota* then employed as a flagship. He was ordered back to his old station on the *Michigan* at Erie, Pennsylvania. At the end of the Civil War, however, he was detached from the *Michigan* and established his home at Owings Mills in Baltimore County, Maryland, not far, of course, from Baltimore. For the next four years he was employed on various duties, mostly on

boards of investigation, examining boards and retiring boards. In 1869 he was ordered to Annapolis as a member of the Board of Visitors of the Naval Academy. He was appointed Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, July 1, 1869, by President Grant. His letter of acceptance was dated at Owings Mills, June 28, 1869.

There were three events of special importance in his régime. They were:

1. The passage of the naval appropriation act of March 3, 1871, by which the chiefs of the four Bureaus of the Navy Department, Medicine and Surgery, Provisions and Clothing, Steam Engineering and Construction and Repair were to be headed by officers with the rank of Commodore and creating the titles of Surgeon General, Paymaster General, Engineer-in-Chief, and Chief Constructor. Dr. Wood became thus the first Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery to bear the title of Surgeon General of the Navy.
2. The building of the naval hospital at Mare Island, California.
3. The change by which medical officers were in the future to be grouped in a definite staff corps with grades established by law—medical director, medical inspector, surgeon, passed assistant surgeon, and assistant surgeon.

This change is of such importance, establishing as it did, titles which have been used for seventy years, that the pertinent portion of the law is reproduced here.

AN ACT MAKING APPROPRIATIONS FOR
THE LEGISLATIVE, EXECUTIVE,
AND JUDICIAL EXPENSES OF THE
GOVERNMENT FOR THE YEAR
ENDING JUNE 30, 1872, AP-
PROVED MARCH 3, 1871.

* * * *

Section 5. That the officers of the medical corps on the active list of the navy shall be as follows:—

Fifteen medical directors, who shall have the relative rank of captain.

Fifteen medical inspectors, who shall have the relative rank of commander, and

Fifty surgeons, who shall have the relative rank of lieutenant commander or lieutenant; and each and all of the above-named officers of the medical corps shall have the pay of surgeons in the navy as now provided; and medical directors, and inspectors, on duty at sea, shall receive the pay of fleet surgeons.

One hundred assistant surgeons, who shall have the relative rank of master or ensign, with the present pay of assistant surgeon in the navy: PROVIDED, That assistant surgeons of three years' service, who have been found qualified for promotion by a medical board of examiners, shall have the pay of passed assistant surgeons, as now provided; and passed assistant surgeons shall have the relative rank of lieutenant or master; and no person under twenty-one, or over twenty-six years of age, shall hereafter be appointed an assistant surgeon in the navy.

Dr. Wood was retired by reason of age on May 27, 1871. At that time the retiring age was sixty-two years. He continued to hold office as Surgeon General, however, until October 25, 1871. After ceasing to be Chief of Bureau he was employed until April 1, 1873 as Medical Inspector General of Hospitals and Fleets. The employment of retired officers on special duties was more usual then than now so this was not remarkable. His retention as Chief of Bureau after his retirement was more unusual.

His death occurred at his home at

Owings Mills in Baltimore County, Maryland, on March 1, 1880.

This first Surgeon General of the Navy was one of the most outstanding incumbents of that office. A man of vigorous intellect and much force of character, he rendered service of great value to the Navy during a long and useful career. He did much to enhance the prestige of the Medical Corps, and his strong common sense, and his persevering attention to any measure likely to improve the health and well-being of the officers and men of the Navy drew the attention and praise of all those concerned with administration in naval affairs during his time.

He was a splendid looking man as can be seen by the picture reproduced on page 320 and which shows him as he appeared when Surgeon General of the Navy. The head is very finely shaped. The hair and beard are abundant and curly. There is another picture of him extant, showing him as he looked when Fleet Surgeon of the Pacific Squadron when about 35 years of age. He was clean shaven except for sideburns. The jaw is square and the whole expression shows resolution and probity, characteristics which he was to display in an eminent degree through his long and distinguished naval career.

The only previous biographical sketches of Wood are those by Commander William Kerr, Medical Corps U. S. Navy, ret., which was published in the *Annals of Medical History*, Volume VI, Number 4, Pages 387-90 in 1924; and the thumbnail sketch by the present writer in the *U. S. Navy Medical Bulletin* of April, 1935.